

Israel-Gaza war

'The most popular Palestinian leader alive': Releasing Marwan Barghouti could transform territories' politics

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The 64-year-old is respected by secular nationalists and Islamists alike, and his much called-for release after two decades in jail for terror charges could bring a ceasefire closer

Israeli soldiers patrol in the West Bank city of Ramallah with a mural showing Marwan Barghouti. Photograph: Nasser Shiyukhi/AP

At times of great upheaval in Palestine, people start to talk about Marwan Barghouti. The 64-year-old political leader serving multiple life sentences in an Israeli prison for murder represents the prospect of a genuine shake-up to the status quo. Palestinian towns – and the Israeli-built concrete walls that cut them up – are covered in graffitied images of Barghouti, his handcuffed hands held high above his head.

Virtually every opinion poll since his imprisonment two decades ago shows Barghouti to be the favourite presidential candidate for the Palestinian people, were they able to hold free elections. A December [survey showed him 40 points ahead](#) of the deeply unpopular current leader [Mahmoud Abbas](#) but also beating Hamas candidates, including the Islamist militant group's political chief, [Ismail Haniyeh](#).

With Palestinian factions deeply divided, Barghouti operates in a middle ground – respected by secular nationalists but also Islamists, many of whom he formed close relationships with in jail. Even [Hamas](#), which despises the western-friendly circles that he is part of, has called for his release as part of a proposed Gaza ceasefire deal.

One of seven children born to a poor farming family in the tiny West Bank village of Kobar, as a teenager Barghouti led student movements for Fatah, the political party founded by [Yasser Arafat](#) of which Palestinian president Abbas is now chairman.

In and out of prison during his university years, Barghouti was deported by the Israelis to Jordan during the first intifada to prevent him from engaging in the uprising. He was allowed back during the optimism of the 1990s peace talks, which he supported. But when those failed, leading to the second and much bloodier intifada, Barghouti played a high-profile public role as a protest organiser.

Barghouti has backed peaceful resistance but also not renounced violence as a means to end the occupation

It was at that time when Barghouti came to wider international attention. A familiar figure at funerals and protests, Barghouti was sought out by the Palestinian and international journalists for comment.

Patient, self-deprecating and articulate, he called himself a “normal guy from the Palestinian street”. His manner suggested he was anything but – many who encountered him in those days thought he represented a confident Palestinian operator, respected by a younger generation.

In Israel, Barghouti is viewed as a founder of the al-Aqsa brigades, an offshoot of Fatah that conducted a series of killings and suicide bombings, targeting buses, restaurants and hotels. The Israeli ministry of foreign affairs [published an article](#) accusing the “terrorist” of “spearheading the bloody second intifada” as leader of armed groups before his 2002 arrest.

Barghouti did not offer a defence at his trial, where he was convicted in 2004 of involvement in five murders, refusing to recognise the court’s authority. Out of court, he denies allegations that he ordered killings.

Barghouti has backed peaceful resistance but also not renounced violence as a means to end the occupation. From jail, he has played a central role in Palestinian politics, and has continued to call for a Palestinian state to be created alongside Israel.

Marwan Barghouti on the opening day of his trial at Tel Aviv’s district court in August 2002.
Photograph: Brennan Linsley/AP

His letters from jail, some smuggled out, have suggested he has abandoned the idea that negotiating directly with Israel will end the crisis. [Writing in the Guardian](#) in 2015, he said: “The real problem is that Israel has chosen occupation over peace, and used negotiations as a smokescreen to advance its colonial project. Every government across the globe knows this simple fact and yet so many of them pretend that returning to the failed recipes of the past could achieve freedom and peace.”

He has long been seen as a successor to Abbas, the 88-year-old ailing leader who heads the internationally recognised Palestinian Authority but has blocked elections, and who Palestinians consistently say should resign.

Abbas is deeply unpopular because of corruption within the PA and because of his coordination with the Israeli army, leading to claims that the PA is a self-interested organisation that effectively operates as a “subcontractor” for the occupation.

Still, Abbas has blocked Barghouti’s ambitions. Tahani Mustafa, a senior Palestine analyst at the International Crisis Group thinktank, says Abbas “has destroyed any institutional avenue to guarantee a legitimate successor”.

“Abbas does recognise that he is in an incredibly weak position. He has effectively centralised his power,” she [said this month](#).

More importantly, Israel has shown no willingness to free the popular politician. Notably, it refused

to include him in a 2011 exchange of more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners for a single soldier held by Hamas. [Yahya Sinwar](#), a key planner of the 7 October attack and Hamas chief in Gaza, was freed in that exchange.

[Barghouti's release](#), if it ever came, would be seen as a moment to shake up Palestinian politics. Khalil Shikaki, who has polled Palestinians for more than two decades as director of the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Research, puts it simply: "Barghouti is the single most popular Palestinian leader alive."

Oliver Holmes and Peter Beaumont

P.S.

- The Observer. The Guardian. Sat 17 Feb 2024 16.25 CET:
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